

## Consumer Culture and the 2011 'Riots'

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### Abstract

This paper argues that in order to be properly comprehended, the 'riots' of August 2011 must be located in the context of an increasingly consumerist society. The suggestion is that the riots represented conformity to the underlying values of a consumerist society, if, momentarily, not its norms. To make this case, the riots are divided into three constituent 'moments': the initial, the acquisitive and the nihilistic. Themes and ideas from the literature on consumer culture and crime are applied to the latter two.

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**Keywords:** *Consumer Culture, Consumerism, Riots*

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### Introduction

**1.1** This paper suggests that the 'riots' that occurred in England during the early part of August 2011 can only be properly comprehended if they are located in the context of a society that is becoming increasingly consumerist in its orientation. Ultimately, rather than signalling any breakdown of society or any pathology on the part of the rioters, the events of August actually represented conformity to the underlying values of consumer culture, and showed how far the dictates of that culture have been internalised by the participants. Thus, the riots can be read as a macabre demonstration of the contemporary vigour of the ideal of the consumer, largely unencumbered by the regulations of an overbearing state or the restraining norms of a robust civil society.

**1.2** In order to make this case, the first part of the paper splits the riots into three constituent parts, or 'moments'. The first of these was the 'initial moment' triggered by the shooting of Mark Duggan by a Metropolitan Police officer, and the protest that followed. Following this was an 'acquisitive moment' characterised by looting and a 'nihilistic moment' characterised by general disorder. The second part of the paper will provide a brief introduction to the notion of consumer culture. The third and fourth parts of the paper will show how the 'acquisitive' and 'nihilistic' moments of the riots can be understood in terms of consumer culture.

### Disentangling the 'Riots'

**2.1** To begin, it is crucial to recognise that the label 'riots' gives the events of August a rather artificial uniformity. As Sumner (2011) has argued, 'we cannot assume that 'rioters' are a correctly classified, homogeneous, group of people – there is a huge difference between leading a gang of hoodies on a looting rampage and being unable to say 'no' when a rioter offers some stolen goods'; 'Riot' is, in fact, 'a loose term of moral judgement, a censure'. Sumner goes on to note that 'the events had a temporal dimension, different phases on different nights, meaning that the original reasons for protesting were not necessarily the reasons for the second phase of riotous looting and general mayhem, and that riots, as collective behaviour, do have a life of their own'.

**2.2** With this in mind, it is possible to suggest that the 'riots' were made up, broadly speaking, of three 'moments'. The first, what could be termed 'initial moment', followed a peaceful protest on 6 August regarding the shooting of Duggan in Tottenham two days earlier. At this point, the events appeared to be following the well-worn path trodden by previous instances of unrest in England. For instance, the Brixton riot of 1981 was triggered by the police's bungled attempt at dealing with a stabbed black youth at a time of heightened tension due to the heavy use of stop and search powers as part of 'Operation Swamp'.

Toxteth's riots later that year had a similar genesis. At Broadwater Farm in 1985, the spark was the death of Cynthia Jarrett as police searched her home. This was after her son had been stopped in a vehicle with an allegedly suspicious tax disc. In all three incidents, and others around that time, a single flashpoint was the ostensible trigger, but the critical feature was the backdrop of racial tension.

**2.3** Yet during August, once this initial phase had passed, the riots escaped from their moorings in the long-standing racial tensions between London residents and the Met, and two more moments emerged; an 'acquisitive moment' characterised by widespread looting, and a 'nihilistic moment', characterised by general disorder, criminal damage, arson, and so on. General disorder is obviously the stuff of riots, and looting is common in these situations too; looting occurred, for example, at both Brixton and Broadwater Farm, and notably also at the Poll Tax riots of 1990 and the Handsworth riot in 1991. Yet in August these two moments spread around the UK in an unprecedented manner, taking in several London boroughs as well as, *inter alia*, Birmingham, Bristol, Gillingham, Nottingham, Leicester, West Bromwich, Wolverhampton, Bury, Liverpool, Manchester, Rochdale and Salford.

**2.4** It is the acquisitive and the nihilistic moments, and the particular shape they took during August, which can be best understood by situating them in terms of consumer culture. The beginnings of such an understanding will be outlined here, following a brief introduction to the idea of consumer culture.

## **Consumer Culture<sup>[1]</sup>**

**3.1** Consumer culture can be loosely defined as the desire and ability to live beyond basic needs. It arguably became a truly 'mass' phenomenon during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and particularly after the second world war (Hall et al. 2008: 89). Yet consumerism's origins can be traced much further back than this. Slater (1997: 10) suggests that we can consider the 'commercial revolution' of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the real starting point; this unites consumerism with 'the whole of modernity' and makes it predate even traditional accounts of the industrial revolution.

**3.2** Thus it is important not to register consumer culture as something novel and unique to our times. As Slater (1997: 1) puts it, 'consumer culture is rediscovered every few decades; or, to be uncharitable, it has been redesigned, repackaged and relaunched as a new academic and political product every generation since the sixteenth century'. Nevertheless, it has been forcefully suggested that consumption has now replaced production as the defining characteristic of advanced western societies (Lasch 1979; Bauman 1998), and that there is a new intensity to it in the era of 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000). It is now possible to speak of a 'culture of consumption', where 'the dominant values of society' derive from 'the activity of consumption' (Hayward 2004: 144). Existence now seems to be dominated by advertising, marketing, mass consumption, and the stylisation of social life (Ibid.). It has been argued that this goes hand in hand with the rise of individualism and 'the death of the social' (Rose 1996). In such a world everything becomes a consumer item, even education and knowledge itself, and consumption becomes the key form of social expression, particularly through what Veblen (2009) in 1899 termed 'conspicuous consumption'.

**3.3** Criminologists have long been alive to the connections between consumer culture and criminality<sup>[2]</sup>, and recently there has been an increased focus on the issue (Taylor 1999; Young 1999, 2007; Hayward 2004; Hall et al. 2008). Themes and ideas from this growing body of work have clear potential to provide the foundations of a sophisticated understanding of the 'acquisitive' and the 'nihilistic' moments of the riots. The remainder of this paper will sketch how this is so.

## **The Acquisitive Moment**

**4.1** The looting of, *inter alia*, electrical stores, sports shops, clothing stores and off-licences was perhaps the defining image of the 2011 riots. As well as those who stole rather mundane items such as bottled water and doughnuts and those who merely received stolen goods, there were also those who brazenly posed for photographs with flat-screen TVs and trainers (The Guardian 2011b). As one would perhaps expect, theorists of consumer culture and crime can provide a persuasive account of acquisitive behaviour such as this.

**4.2** Merton's (1938) suggestion that crime and deviance occur when the culturally approved goal of material wealth is unable to be realised through socially approved means, and the notion of the frustrated consumer that it evokes, has long been a staple of criminological thought. In a similar vein is Young's more recent view of the 'bulimia' of contemporary society, where 'massive cultural inclusion is accompanied by systematic structural exclusion. [...] The consumer markets propagate a citizenship of joyful consumption yet the ability to spend (and sometimes even to enter) within the mall is severely limited' (2007: 32). From these perspectives, looting by those who are relatively socially deprived is not just a response to their relative deprivation and exclusion. It is also a consequence of their thorough *inclusion* in the consumerist dream. Thus, it has been argued that the looting during August represented 'envy masked as triumphant carnival' (Zizek 2011), envy of the celebrities and footballers who consume so conspicuously and publicly, but whose power to consume is unavailable to the bulk of us. The momentary overcoming of structural impediments to consumption is evidence of the free market economy working precisely as it should, what Sumner (2011) calls 'opportunistic materialism'; he suggests that when uncompromising individualism is valued so highly and state regulation of big business is seen as anathema, we should scarcely be surprised when 'Thatcher's babies' behave like 'aggressive entrepreneurs with scant regard for law' (Ibid.).

**4.3** Yet, as Hayward (2004: 150) makes clear, Young's notion of bulimia (and by extension Merton's theory of anomie) cannot adequately explain what has happened to the idea of need in society; 'what people are now feeling deprived of is no longer simply the material product itself, but, rather, the sense of identity that

products have come to bestow on the individual'. When consumption is seen as the font of identity, it comes to be considered as a basic right (Ibid.). Much was made of the fact that many of the looted items were 'positional goods'- trainers, clothing, flat screen TVs. It is no coincidence that such goods confer distinction on their owners and save them the humiliation of being a member of the consumerist 'other', the disreputable, non-consumerist poor (Hall et al. 2008: 58). Deferring one's gratification and 'saving up' are no help in such a situation; during August, even those in employment took part (*The Guardian*: 2011a).<sup>[3]</sup>

**4.4** Thus, it seems likely that the looting of consumer items does not represent an inversion of the dominant values of society. The looting arguably did not signify a reworking of meanings, values and goals, but merely a reworking of the 'strategic normative practices' employed to realise those goals (Hall et al. 2008: 62). If this is correct, then it is difficult to conceive of the looters as 'others' in any meaningful sense. The looters were attempting to acquire material products, but, more than this, they were also trying to consolidate or even better their place in the symbolic order, just as the conventional shopper does. There was no rebellion against consumerism. Instead, it was an attempt to join in (Bauman 2011).

## The Nihilistic Moment

**5.1** If the connections between consumerism and the acts of looting that formed part of the riots can be made in a relatively straightforward manner, at first glance it may appear that the nihilistic moment does not respond quite so readily to a similar type of analysis. Yet even though the acts that constituted the nihilistic moment were not acquisitive in nature, it can be argued that they too only make sense in the context of consumerism. Two reasons for this stand out.

**5.2** In the first place, consumer culture values not only the consumption of material goods, but also of fleeting consumer 'experiences' (for example see Urry 1995; Boden 2001). This is perhaps the logical endpoint of the tumbling 'half-life' of material consumer products which means that even expensive items are only momentarily in fashion. As Harvey (1989: 285) has argued, 'if there are limits to the accumulation and turnover of physical goods [...] then it makes sense for capitalists to turn to the provision of very ephemeral services in consumption'. This includes personal, business, educational and health services, but also 'entertainment, spectacles, happenings and distractions', such as visits to museums, attending rock concerts or movies, going to health clubs, and even shopping itself. As Bauman (1997: 146) puts it, we have moved from a society of 'soldier producers' to one of 'sensation gatherers'.

**5.3** Seen in this light, the nihilistic moment begins to bear some resemblance to the acquisitive moment. In the latter, the looters attained the consumer goods which confer status and identity (as demanded by consumer culture) in an illicit fashion. In the former, those who caused general mayhem were creating an exciting, edgy experience (as demanded by consumer culture) in a way also not sanctioned by the authorities; it is important to remember with Katz (1988) the often seductive and sensual appeal of crime. In this sense the *act* of looting itself can also be seen as part of the nihilistic moment, for even those who passed on or abandoned their newly acquired products still experienced the thrill of the initial moment of acquisition. Remember too the relative youth of the bulk of the participants (*The Guardian* 2011a; 2011c), and their coming of age in a culture that valorises immediate gratification and sensual engagement (Hayward 2004: 152). This was a theme park with no entrance fee.

**5.4** Secondly and perhaps more fundamentally, the nihilistic moment has been characterised as a 'zero-degree protest, a violent action demanding nothing' (Zizek 2011). The participants had no obvious message to deliver, and their targets were not the citadels of power and authority. Instead, the damage to property and people was largely in the very communities where the rioters live. This calls to mind the seemingly increasingly antagonistic relations between individuals in broadly similar material positions. As Hall et al. (2008: 192-5) relate, in place of old notions of class solidarity there is now an 'expectation of self-interest on behalf of others' and life is 'motivated by the individual's perception of a constant struggle with hostile others in a dog-eat-dog world', a Hobbesian war of all against all. Hall et al. place this in a historical context by tracing the development of what they term the 'pseudo-pacification process'. They suggest that during the transition from feudalism to capitalism the bourgeoisie repressed violence and hostility in order to protect private property. Yet the aggressively competitive value system that underlay nascent capitalism remained undisturbed, and since the Thatcher-Reagan years state efforts to slow 'social atomisation' (Ibid.: 215) by expanding opportunities to engage in consumerism and by coming to something of a *rapprochement* with labour have been largely abandoned. Thus, symbolic violence is encouraged, and this includes the disparagement and humiliation of others due to perceived defects in their consumption choices.<sup>[4]</sup> The Hobbesian war is therefore played out in the shopping malls, but, during the nihilistic moment it briefly spilled onto the streets and became more visible. Thus the rioters would likely not perceive the victims of their excesses as their historical class comrades or even fellow members of relatively deprived communities. Instead they are rivals in the brutal competition for scarce resources and status. This underlay the callousness of so much that occurred in the nihilistic moment.

**5.5** Of course, it could be argued that the riots represented a fleeting collective expression of outrage at deepening inequality, crystallised by the current economic situation and government spending cuts. Even if there is some truth in this, it is important to note that even inequality itself is increasingly framed in terms of the 'right to consume' and the extent to which that 'right' is denied (Hayward 2004: 149-50). On the other hand, there are those that feel *consumerism itself* allows for creativity, self-realisation and authentic resistance (Redhead 1993; 1997; Featherstone 1994; Frank 1997; Miles 2000). Yet the evidence is surely mounting that consumption actually 'displaces the potential for real resistance, which requires critical thought, a new radical subjectivity and real politics' (Hall et al. 2008: 114). The sale of products, from t-shirts to cars, with the implied values of 'rebellion' and 'freedom' attached to them, and the practices of the marketing industry that bestows such mystique 'is the generator of fake resistance in a rolling wheel driven forward in cycles of aimless transgression' (Ibid.).

**5.6** Consumerism, then, appears to foster an atomisation and an attendant self-interest that renders genuine collective resistance incredibly difficult to construct. The nihilistic moment of the riots- itself made up of acts of 'aimless transgression'- may well have had the external appearance of protest, resistance, or rebellion, but on closer inspection it was actually evidence of conformity to the brutal underlying values of a free market consumerist society, if, momentarily, not its norms.

## Conclusion

**6.1** To be clear, the suggestion made here is not that the consumer culture of late modern Britain *caused* the riots in any straightforward manner. Rather, it seems that the acts of those who partook in the riots, both in the acquisitive and the nihilistic moments, can only be fully comprehended if they are analysed in the context of a society that is becoming increasingly consumerist in its orientation.

**6.2** Once the riots are seen in such a light, they begin to make sense as an extreme, but not pathological, manifestation of some of the underlying trends of contemporary society. The Janus-faced truth of the riots is that they represented a disruption to social order whilst simultaneously suggesting the strength and vitality of the consumer culture that is now such a central plank of social life in this country.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the terms 'consumer culture' and 'consumerism' will be used interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> See the studies in this direction by the Marxist Willem Bonger in 1916 (1969) and the 'strain theorist' Robert Merton (1938).

<sup>3</sup> *The Guardian* reported that amongst the defendants in the magistrates' court were a teaching assistant, students, a chef, an accounts clerk and a scaffolder. The charges such people were facing are not detailed in the report. By 12<sup>th</sup> September, of the 462 individuals who had been found guilty of riot related offences at magistrates' courts, 212 had been found guilty of burglary, 5 of robbery, and 103 of theft (Ministry of Justice 2011: 7).

<sup>4</sup> It has been persuasively argued that the censorious labelling of 'chavs' is an example of this (Hayward and Yar 2006).

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